

THE USE OF FORCE IN SOVIET POLICY AND THE WEST

Alex Alexiev

March 1980

THE USE OF FORCE IN SOVIET POLICY AND THE WEST*

Alex Alexiev

The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California

March 1980

It is by now widely believed that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Carter administration's reaction to it mark a new watershed in the relationship between the two superpowers and augur a period of tensions and hostility, if not the beginning of a new Cold War. The main reason for this reassessment is the belief that the Soviet action represents a qualitatively new stage in Soviet policy -- one characterized by the unrestrained use of military power for the achievement of political objectives. Perhaps nothing is more characteristic of this attitude than the President's own statement that the Soviet intervention represents a "radical departure" from previous Kremlin policy, which has caused a dramatic reversal of his views of Soviet policy and ultimate objectives. In fact, the Soviet assault on Afghanistan, though particularly brutal, is neither unprecedented, nor is it particularly surprising, and Washington's present attitudes reveal a fundamental misperception of Soviet international behavior in general, and the role of military power in Moscow's foreign policy in particular.

The incorporation of Afghanistan in the Soviet bloc, to put it simply, is just another example of the expansion of the Soviet sphere by force of arms. As such it conforms perfectly to long-standing Soviet theory and practice on the use of force.

The Leninist Legacy and the Soviet Use of Force

Present Soviet attitudes and practice toward the use of force in international relations faithfully reflect a number of theoretical

*Text of lecture delivered to UCLA public lecture series "Tension Areas in World Politics" on March 4, 1980.

postulates on war and military intervention, formulated by Lenin more than sixty years ago. Lenin began by redefining the traditional distinction between just and unjust wars and claimed that any war conducted in the interests of the proletariat (as defined by the communist party) was by its very nature a just war. Further he no longer differentiated between offensive and defensive wars and argued that even a war initiated and waged on foreign territory continued to be defensive, and therefore just, if conducted by a socialist state. Indeed, Lenin was quite specific on this point, as when he admonished his followers that "it will be simply stupid not to recognize the possibility of a war initiated by the victorious proletariat against a capitalist country". Such wars of intervention, for him, acquired the character of revolutionary wars. Moreover, Lenin firmly believed that the ultimate victory of communism could only be achieved by armed force. As early as 1916 he prophesied that, sooner or later, the revolutionary proletariat will create a powerful military alliance of what he called "terrible nations", which then by force of arms will make sure that capitalist society comes to a "horrible end". He was also quite convinced that wars and military intervention will continue to be useful as long as there is capitalism. Said he, "Only when we have totally defeated, subjugated and expropriated the bourgeoisie in the whole world, and not only in one country, will wars become impossible".

These Leninist views have been consistently mirrored in the military doctrine and policies of all his successors, including the present leadership, with the sole difference that nuclear war, because of its destructiveness, has been excluded as a useful instrument for the advancement of socialism. This does not necessarily mean that the Kremlin is bent on military conquest of the world, or that it has a specific blueprint to this end. What it does mean, however, is that it continues to believe firmly in the unlimited utility of military power, both as a guarantee of an assertive policy and the practical means for the accomplishment of specific foreign-political objectives.

Soviet history of the last 60 years is replete with evidence that the use of military force has indeed played the decisive role

in the achievement of important objectives. From the fledgling days of the young Bolshevik state military power has been used extensively not only for dealing with assorted domestic opponents, but also for extending the revolution to outlying areas which had shown little enthusiasm for joining the Soviet state. Thus it was the Red Army that finally assured the incorporation of both the Caucasus and the vast Central Asian area by intervening militarily in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaydzhan and in a score of smaller principalities. In all cases the Soviet intervention followed alleged "calls for assistance" from unspecified local revolutionary elements; a practice continued to the present. Soviet readiness to use military force in total disregard of international treaties and contractual obligations was demonstrated in a most brutal fashion on the eve of World II when, following the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939, Moscow embarked on a course of open aggression and territorial aggrandizement against all of its European neighbors. In the process it annexed outright Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, countries with which, it should be noted, it had friendship and non-aggression treaties, and seized large chunks of territory from Poland, Romania and Finland. The end of WWII brought about another dramatic Soviet expansion by military force with the establishment of communist puppet regimes in all of Eastern Europe; regimes that would not have lasted long, had it not been for the Soviet occupation forces. Military intervention has also served the Kremlin well in the post-war period in its efforts to preserve its hegemony over what became known as the Soviet Bloc. On at least three occasions--East Germany 1953, Hungary 1956 and Czechoslovakia 1968--Soviet use of massive force has prevented the potential defection of a client state from the Soviet orbit. Recent Soviet propensities to promote political goals by sponsoring military interventions by proxy, whether in Angola, Ethiopia or Cambodia, are another expression of the Soviet philosophy on the utility of power.

Moscow's long record of military coercion for political purposes has provided some clear cut lessons for the Soviet leadership. It

has taught them that whenever military might has been brought to bear decisively the end result has invariably been a substantial Soviet gain. Experience has also shown them that the best way to preserve that gain is to retain a military presence in the subjugated country. "Socialism," Stalin used to say, "is where the Soviet army stands." What this implies for the future of Afghanistan is rather obvious.

Conversely, experience has also taught the Soviets that inability to control militarily a given conflict has more often than not resulted in setbacks and humiliation. This has been the case, for example, with the defections of Yugoslavia and Albania from Soviet hegemony, the expulsion of Soviet advisors from Egypt and the Sino-Soviet split.

Textbooks on international relations traditionally describe the use of force in relations between nations as the "ultima ratio" or last resort. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, has throughout its existence regarded and used military coercion as the "prima ratio". The only decisive calculus governing Soviet interventionism has been whether the given objective could be accomplished expeditiously and with relative impunity. To this extent Afghanistan is no different than, for example, the Soviet invasion of Georgia in 1921, Poland 1939, Czechoslovakia 1968 or sending the Cubans to Angola in 1975.

Soviet Military Power and the West

While Soviet reliance on military power and aggression as the primary means for political persuasion is of long standing, in the past most of its unfortunate victims have been countries along its periphery and the global balance has not been unduly disturbed. Lately, however, several trends have converged to create a new and highly disturbing outlook for the West. Without question the most far-reaching change has been the dramatic reversal of the military balance of power between the Soviet Union and the United States. Relentlessly pursuing its military build-up throughout the 1960s and 1970s the Soviet Union has not only significantly increased its

superiority in conventional warfare capabilities, but has caught up and surpassed the US in most meaningful indicators of strategic power. As a result, as we enter the new decade, for the first time in its history, the Soviet Union is on the threshold of achieving overall military superiority over the United States.

At the same time in the United States there has been a shift away from the traditional reliance on unilateral measures for assuring national security and toward security through cooperation with the Soviets and arms control. Underlying this new attitude have been changing US assumptions about the utility of military power and Soviet objectives. The humiliating defeat suffered by America in Vietnam served to convince many that military power does not guarantee political advantage and cast a grave doubt on the very legitimacy of the military dimension of foreign policy. American perceptions of the Soviet Union in the 60s also began to undergo significant changes toward a more positive general view. Sovietologists, for instance, began to argue that the Soviet Union had ceased to be a totalitarian state and was more subject to the imperatives of a modern industrial state than ideological dogma, while political scientists discovered a so-called "convergence theory" according to which the communist system was becoming increasingly liberalized much as the capitalist one was acquiring some socialist traits, with both of them inevitably bound to converge at the happy medium of a new social utopia. Characteristic in this respect were also the efforts of a whole spate of "revisionist" historians, whose works exonerated the Kremlin of any wrongdoing in the post WWII years, while accusing the United States of every conceivable crime of duplicity, deviousness and blackmail against the Soviets. Others sought to explain away the ominous Soviet build-up by claiming that they were simply trying to catch up with us, and, when they did not seem to stop at that, with some alleged Russian psychological need to "overinsure" in order to feel secure.

On the political level the same sentiments were expressed in the totally unrealistic hopes and expectations pinned on detente and arms control, which promptly came to be considered a universal panacea and the only way to insure security. Behind all this was the rather sanguine assumption that our objectives for a stable

world order based on respect for sovereignty and non-interference were shared by the old men in the Politburo, who, as President Carter himself only recently assured us, were men of peaceful intentions and honor.

The practical consequence of these illusions have been steadily declining defense expenditures to the point where, at present, our defense spending is only half as large (as percentage of national income) as it was in the early 60s, despite the tremendous growth of Soviet military capabilities in the meantime. This relative neglect of US military power in the face of an unprecedented Soviet build-up and the apparent American reluctance to get directly involved in various conflicts in the last few years have not only tilted the balance toward the Soviets, but, more dangerously, may have convinced Moscow that the US has lost the will to defend the interests of the Free World. The changed correlation of power between the superpowers has had another detrimental consequence for the West. In the past the overwhelming American strategic preponderance has often more than compensated for Soviet conventional superiority in a localized conflict and has deterred them from aggressive action, as was the case in both Berlin crises of 1958 and 1962. This is clearly no longer the case.

Another factor which has contributed greatly to the present uncertainty and possibly enhanced Soviet assertiveness was the sudden realization of the extent of Western vulnerability due to its dependence on imported oil. The Arab oil embargo of 1973 and the subsequent crises vividly demonstrated that most Western democracies depend for their very existence as modern industrial states on the continuous and uninterrupted flow of oil from external non-Western sources. The political implications and opportunities presenting themselves could not have been lost to the Russians.

The final important trend characterizing the present international situation is the emergence of a dangerous disequilibrium in the Soviet system which is reflected in its competition with the West. The fact is that while the Soviet Union has been winning the military race, it has been losing ground in every other category. Economically it has suffered serious reversals and appears headed toward a prolonged

period of stagnation and decline. It has not only failed to catch up with the West in the vital areas of technology and labor productivity, but, if anything, the gap has widened. Indeed had it not been for the tremendous natural resources of the country the Soviet Union would have long ago become a second-rate economic power. As it is, if present trends continue, it will be surpassed in GNP by both Japan and West Germany in the not too distant future. Soviet agriculture remains a disaster area and, more than 60 years after the October revolution, the country that was once known as the "granary of Europe" is unable to feed its citizenry. Culturally Soviet society, plagued by oppression and dogmatism, remains a conformist wasteland. Even Soviet ideology, once an attractive utopia for many an idealist, has degenerated into a barren and ossified dogma, rejected by many communists outside the Soviet sphere. The steady deterioration of the Soviet position in every non-military category, however, contains in itself the seeds of great danger, since a policy aiming to arrest the decline by expansionism may appear increasingly feasible and tempting to the Soviet leadership.

To sum up, at the present stage of the historic confrontation between Western democracy and Soviet totalitarianism, the West, though powerful economically, is declining militarily and seems to lack political will, while the Soviet Union, plagued by economic and other failures as it is, shows political singularity of purpose and military confidence as never before. Should these trends continue the outlook for the coming decade does not augur well for democracy.

What could be done to reverse these perilous trends? Unfortunately there are no ready panaceas nor instant quick fixes. Neither are grain embargoes or Olympic boycotts a solution, or even effective steps toward a solution of the problem. What is needed is a radical rethinking of our political and military strategy for dealing with Moscow. We should finally realize that, barring a major change in the Soviet system, the Kremlin's policy goals and historical objectives are fundamentally at odds and inimical to the intrinsic values and interests of a free society, and detente and arms control illusions,

no matter how attractive, should not be allowed to obscure this fact. Above all we must make it abundantly clear to the Soviets that they would not be allowed to achieve any meaningful or even perceived military superiority over the United States. If that means a new arms race, so be it. It is one race America cannot lose. Speaking of a "new" race, by the way, is incorrect; arms racing has continued unabated in the last ten years or so, the only difference being that it has been pursued unilaterally by the Soviet Union. Further the Soviets should be told in no uncertain terms that any new incursion in the Third areas, whether by proxy or not, will be met with a firm response, including force of arms if necessary. It is of crucial importance here for the United States, by whatever means, to prevent Moscow from achieving regional military superiority anywhere in the world. In all three cases in its history in which the Soviet Union enjoyed uncontested regional superiority -- 1919-1922 along its periphery and 1939-1941 and after 1945 in Eastern Europe, it never failed to embark on unrestrained military aggression. On the other hand, the Soviet leaders are by no means military adventurers or fanatical warmongers and whenever they have been met with determined Western opposition backed by force, they have retreated, and have done so even at the cost of humiliation. The Berlin blockade of 1948 and the Cuban missile crisis are just two such examples.

It would be nice, of course, if America did not have to again play the role of a world policeman, but in the world in which we live if we renege on our obligations, somebody else is clearly able and more than willing to fill the vacuum, and that somebody else has a proven record of disrespect for accepted norms of behavior.

Many will undoubtedly find grave faults with such a new strategy. It will be said, for example, that it may provoke the Soviets into nuclear confrontation and/or strengthen the most conservative and militaristic elements among the Soviet leadership and thus make things even worse. The answer to this is simple. Soviet leaders know well the nature and possible consequences of a nuclear conflagration and are as afraid of it as we are. Moreover it is only after they realize that reliance on military power alone will not help them achieve foreign-political objectives and that continuing to spend

half of their budget on arms without any visible returns will not solve acute domestic problems, that they might seriously consider a radical reform of the Soviet system. Without a far-reaching reform of the Soviet system and its characteristic fetishism of military power, on the other hand, Western hopes for truly meaningful detente, disarmament and stable security will remain as illusory as they have been prior to Afghanistan.